



**Whatever It Takes:
How Professional Learning Communities Respond
When Kids Don't Learn**

Study Guide

This National Educational Service study guide is a companion to the newest Professional Learning Communities at Work™ book by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek: *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn*. This guide provides topics for individual reflection or group discussion. It includes chapter-specific questions that can be addressed in a concluding activity once the entire book has been read or upon completion of each chapter.

Introduction

An Unprecedented Challenge

1. Consider the brief review of the characteristics of a Professional Learning Community offered in the introduction. Educators who have considered this description of a PLC never express opposition to these characteristics; yet they typically struggle when attempting to create these conditions in their schools. What are the barriers and obstacles that make it difficult for educators to implement a PLC in their schools? How have some schools been able to overcome these barriers and become PLCs?
2. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future contends that "communities of learning must no longer be considered utopian; they must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America's schools." Is it possible that schools operating as PLCs could become the norm rather than the exception? If so, what are promising strategies for bringing about this transformation?
3. In the introduction, the authors claim that schools should respond to students who experience difficulty in learning with **systematic, timely, and directive interventions** that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning. Would most educators oppose this proposal? Do you? Why or why not?

Chapter 1

From “Learning for the Few” to “All Kids Can Learn” to “All Kids Will Learn—Or Else!”

1. Do you agree with the assertion in this chapter that “contemporary public schools in the United States are now being called upon to achieve a standard that goes far beyond the goals of any previous generation—high levels of learning for all students?” If this represents a new goal, what were the goals of schooling in the past?
2. This chapter introduces three critical questions the authors maintain schools *must* consider if they are to fulfill their stated mission of “high levels of learning for all.” Do you agree with that assertion? Do you feel any of the questions are not “critical,” and that a school could help all students learn at high levels without the collective consideration of that question? Are there other questions you feel should be added to the list?
3. This chapter introduces the topic of *formative* versus *summative* assessments—a topic that will be referenced repeatedly throughout the book. What is the distinction between the two?

Chapter 2

How Do We Respond When Kids Don't Learn?

1. This chapter describes the different responses of four schools that confront students who are not learning. Are there other responses you can identify?
2. Do you agree with the assertion that “in the real world of schools, we have *all four* of these responses occurring in the same school at the same time. . . . Students in the same school who experience difficulty in learning will be subject to very different responses based upon the beliefs and practices of their teachers”? Cite evidence from your own school to support your answer.
3. The authors contend that PLCs approach time and support for learning from a very different perspective than that of traditional schools. Summarize that difference in your own words.
4. Educators could argue that time and support for learning have always been variables in school. They could point to retention, summer school, remedial programs, and schools that design curricula to stretch 1 year of algebra into a 2-year program as examples of traditional approaches that give students extra time and support for learning. Why would the authors reject these strategies as inconsistent with their message?

5. The chapter concludes with the scenario of what happens to Johnny Jones when he is not learning. Do you agree with the idea that “this situation represents the norm in most schools?” Why or why not?

Chapter 3

A High School’s Collective Response When Kids Don’t Learn:

Adlai Stevenson High School

1. This chapter reflects on the varying explanations and reasons offered at Adlai Stevenson High School in the early 1980s as to why students were not being successful. What explanations are offered at your school?
2. How did Stevenson High School . . .
 - a. Identify students who needed additional time and support for learning?
 - b. Provide this additional time and support?
3. Generate a list of the various steps the school created to give students additional time and support.
 - a. Which steps could be easily adopted in your school or adapted to meet the needs of your students?
 - b. Which steps could be adopted or adapted after considerable effort?
 - c. Which steps would be impossible to adopt or adapt in your school?

Chapter 4

Overcoming Logistical Barriers at Adlai Stevenson

1. This chapter describes how Stevenson staff addressed some of the barriers they confronted when attempting to provide students with timely, directive, systematic interventions. List some of the barriers you will confront in your school.
2. Use “Where Do We Go From Here?” Worksheet #1 (at the end of this guide) to develop a plan for creating a system of interventions in your own school.

Chapter 5

Providing Time and Support for Kids in Middle School: Freeport Intermediate School

1. Some critics of the middle school concept maintain that the model has been too focused on the social and emotional development of young adolescents at the expense of the academic rigor necessary for their intellectual development. What is your reaction to that criticism?
2. How did Freeport Intermediate . . .
 - a. Identify students who needed additional time and support for learning?
 - b. Provide that additional time and support?

3. Freeport Intermediate calls upon teachers to give common assessments to students on a regular basis and to share their results with each other in order to identify and replicate successful strategies a colleague might be using. What concerns might teachers have about this process? What steps could be taken to address some of those concerns in a productive way?

Chapter 6

A School-Wide System of Time and Support for Elementary Students: Boones Mill Elementary School

1. Boones Mill began its process of creating a school-wide system of time and support by building shared knowledge of the current reality in the school in terms of how the school responded when a student was not learning. Its staff demonstrated the discipline to confront the brutal facts of that reality. What is your current reality? What happens in your school when kids don't learn?
2. How did Boones Mill Elementary School . . .
 - a. Identify students who needed additional time and support for learning?
 - b. Provide that additional time and support?

3. Review the steps in the “Team Learning Process” utilized by Boones Mill. How did this process contribute to the implementation of Project PASS, the school’s system of time and support for students?
4. Once Boones Mill was able to create a time each day when students were available for additional support, staff members were able to identify a variety of ways to enlist the assistance of others in giving students personal attention. What additional human resources could you enlist in the effort to help all students learn at high levels?

Chapter 7

A School-Wide System of Time and Support for Elementary Students: Los Penasquitos Elementary School

1. How did Los Penasquitos Elementary School . . .
 - a. Identify students who needed additional time and support for learning?
 - b. Provide that additional time and support?
2. Compare and contrast the Boones Mill plan for intervention with the Los Penasquitos plan for intervention.

3. How are the commitments presented in the Los Pen Pledge different from the belief statements included in most strategic planning and visioning processes being used by schools?
4. Contrast the use of the Los Pen Student Success Team with the typical use of Child Study Teams in traditional schools.
5. Los Pen operates under the assumption that student achievement data should be easily accessible to and openly shared among teachers. Is student achievement data easily accessible and openly shared in your school? What steps might be taken to make this happen in your school?

Chapter 8

Common Threads

1. This chapter reiterates the characteristics of a PLC presented in the introduction and provides examples of how the four featured schools brought these characteristics to life. Use “Where Do We Go From Here” Worksheets #2 through #6 (at the end of this guide) to assess your school in each area and to generate plans for moving forward.

2. This chapter describes principals who used “simultaneous loose-tight leadership” in implementing improvement processes in their schools. What are the things leaders must be “tight” about if they hope to create PLCs?
3. Provide examples of how principals empowered their staffs (were “loose”) by giving them significant authority and autonomy in the improvement process.
4. Consider how you might apply the concept of simultaneous loose-tight leadership in your school.

Chapter 9

The Philosophical Challenges of Systematic Interventions for Students

1. This chapter explores several challenges that might be raised against the proposal to build a system of interventions for students when they are not learning. What other philosophical challenges might be presented?
2. Most of the challenges to the system of interventions will focus on implementation problems rather than on philosophical concerns. Objections are likely to take the form of “we don’t have enough ‘fill in the blank’ (time, money, resources, space, consensus, kids who will comply).” What are some strategies for addressing these concerns?

3. The authors believe that “the benefits of PLC concepts will speak for themselves if educators demonstrate good faith toward one another as they honestly assess both best practices for helping all students achieve at high levels and the current reality of their own schools.” If they are correct, one of the challenges leaders will face is how to help staff build shared knowledge regarding best practices and current reality. How would you propose to meet this challenge?

Chapter 10

Creating a Stretch Culture: A Process, Not a Program

1. What is the primary message the authors are attempting to convey with this chapter?
2. The authors cite research that concludes a climate of “high expectations for student achievement” is a critical element of effective schools, but then suggest that the term has been widely misunderstood and misapplied. Clarify the nature of “high expectations” in a PLC.
3. If you were called upon to build a system of interventions to assist students with their learning, what is a short-term win you would plan to achieve in the first 3 months and how would you celebrate that win?

Where Do We Go From Here?

A Systematic Process for Responding to Students Who Don't Learn

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Reflect on your discussion of a Professional Learning Community and then answer the questions presented below.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Each student's learning is monitored with formative assessments on a timely basis.</p> <p>The school has a plan for providing a student with additional time and support during the school day if he or she experiences initial difficulty.</p> <p>This support is timely, systematic, and directive.</p>				

Where Do We Go From Here?

School Culture: Clearly Defined Outcomes

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Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>The structure and culture of the school demonstrate that its primary purpose is learning.</p> <p>Teachers in the school have worked together to clarify and focus on the essential outcomes for each course, each grade level, and each unit of instruction.</p> <p>These common essential outcomes reflect the teachers’ efforts to build shared knowledge regarding best practice.</p>				

Where Do We Go From Here?

A Collaborative Culture

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Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Teachers work together as members of collaborative teams. The members of each team work interdependently to achieve common goals.</p> <p>Each team is provided with time to meet and uses that time to engage in collective inquiry on questions specifically linked to gains in student achievement.</p> <p>Each team adopts and observes protocols, which clarify how members will fulfill their responsibilities to the team.</p> <p>Each team is asked to generate and submit products that result from their discussion of critical questions.</p>				

Where Do We Go From Here?

School Improvement Goals Drive Team Goals

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Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Each team translates school goals into a team goal.</p> <p>Goals are SMART — Strategic, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Oriented, and Timebound.</p> <p>Team members assist one another as they work together interdependently to achieve their collective goal.</p>				

Where Do We Go From Here?

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Individuals and Teams Use Assessment Information to Impact Their Professional Practice

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The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Reflect on your discussion of a Professional Learning Community and then answer the questions presented below.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Each teacher and team receives relevant feedback. Information is provided regarding the extent to which students meet agreed-upon standards of mastery on a valid test in comparison to all the students in the school attempting to meet the same standard.</p> <p>The teams utilize formative tests throughout the year to (1) identify students who need additional time and support, (2) help individual teachers identify areas of strength and weakness in their instruction, and (3) help the team measure progress towards its goals and identify areas that need attention.</p>				

Where Do We Go From Here?

Effective Communication

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Reflect on your discussion of a Professional Learning Community and then answer the questions presented below.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community	What steps and activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating and/or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>The school communicates its focus on learning consistently and persistently. It develops specific plans to improve levels of learning.</p> <p>The school monitors learning on a timely basis. Staff members model a personal commitment to learning. The driving questions of the school focus on learning.</p> <p>Resources are allocated to promote learning.</p> <p>Evidence of learning is celebrated. There is a systematic response to students who are not learning.</p> <p>Staff who are inattentive to student learning are confronted.</p>				